

Stated Briefly

# How long does it take English learner students entering school in kindergarten in Washington Road Map districts to develop English proficiency?



Stated Briefly

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This brief describes findings on the percentage of English learner students entering school in kindergarten in seven Washington school districts who developed the English proficiency necessary to be reclassified as former English learner students and the average time to reclassification. Eighty-five percent of English learner students who entered kindergarten between 2000/01 and 2007/08 achieved reclassification by 2012/13. It took those students an average of 3.2 years to be reclassified. Student characteristics—such as English proficiency at entry to kindergarten, gender, home language, country of birth, race/ethnicity, and special education status—were associated with reclassification. The results of this study can help school districts set realistic expectations for the time it takes English learner students to achieve English proficiency and may help state education agencies as they create new accountability targets to comply with the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015.

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This brief is a companion document to Greenberg Motamed, J. (2015). *Time to reclassification: How long does it take English learner students in Washington Road Map districts to develop English proficiency?* (REL 2015-092). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. That report is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?ProjectID=348>.

## **Why this study?**

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Knowing the time it typically takes English learner students to develop English proficiency is important to educators because students who do not have English proficiency struggle to learn grade-level content, take longer to graduate, and graduate at much lower rates than do their English-proficient peers (Callahan, 2013; Gwynne, Pareja, Ehrlich, & Allensworth, 2012; Kim, 2011).

Like much of the United States, Washington state has seen substantial growth in the number of English learner students. From 2000/01 to 2012/13 the English learner student population in Washington increased 59 percent, while the non-English learner student population increased 1 percent. In 2012/13 schools in Road Map districts accounted for 14 percent of all Washington students and 22 percent of Washington English learner students (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2014). The Road Map Project is a cradle-to-career initiative involving seven school districts (Auburn, Federal Way, Highline, Kent, Renton, Seattle, and Tukwila) that have the highest rates of poverty and the lowest levels of academic achievement in the Seattle metropolitan area. The goal of the project is to double by 2020 the number of students who are college or career ready.

To achieve this goal, the Road Map districts must address the needs of their English learner students, who are less likely than non-English learner students to graduate from high school (Gwynne et al., 2012; Kim, 2011). In 2012/13 the four-year graduation rate was 46 percent among English learner students in the Road Map districts—substantially lower than the 72 percent among all students in those districts and 76 percent among all Washington students (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2014).

To understand more about English learner student populations and their challenges, the Road Map Project English Language Learner Work Group requested that Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest conduct a study of how long it takes students in Road Map district schools to achieve reclassification as former English learner students.

## **What the study examined**

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This brief presents a subset of findings from a study on the average time to reclassification among English learner students who entered a Road Map district school at any time between the beginning of kindergarten and the end of grade 5 (Greenberg Motamedi, 2015). This brief focuses on the 6,944 English learner students who entered kindergarten in Road Map district schools in 2000/01–2007/08 because kindergarten is when the majority of English learner students enter Washington state schools (Malagon, McCold, & Nelson, 2013). This brief does not consider students who entered a Road Map district school after kindergarten.

Average time to reclassification is the average number of years it took English learner students to achieve a grade-specific score on a Washington English language proficiency assessment and be officially reclassified as former English learner students. Because some English learner students did not achieve reclassification within the time period of the study, the rate of reclassification (that is, the percentage of English learner students who were reclassified by 2012/13) was also examined. Results are disaggregated by student English proficiency at kindergarten entry into Washington schools, gender, home language, country of birth, race/ethnicity, and special education status.<sup>1</sup> The study used student-level data from the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, which included student records from 2000/01 to 2012/13.

## **What the study found**

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The analyses yielded seven main findings.

**On average, it took more than three years for English learner students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district school to be reclassified as former English learner students, and about a sixth of them did not achieve reclassification within the time period of the dataset (2005/06–2012/13)**

For the 85 percent of English learner students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district and who were reclassified as a former English learner student during the study period, the average time to reclassification was 3.2 years. This means that 15 percent of English learner students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district in 2000/01–2007/08 were still enrolled in a Road Map district school and were still classified as English learner students in 2012/13. Student characteristics such as English proficiency at kindergarten entry, gender, home language, country of birth, race/ethnicity, and special education status were associated with both the time to reclassification and the rate of reclassification, as explained in the following sections.<sup>2</sup>

**English learner students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district school with advanced English proficiency achieved reclassification more quickly and at higher rates than did students who entered with basic or intermediate English proficiency**

English learner students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district school with advanced English proficiency were reclassified, on average, two years before their peers who entered with basic English proficiency and more than a year before their peers who entered with intermediate English proficiency. The students who entered with advanced English proficiency also had higher rates of reclassification than did students who entered with basic or intermediate English proficiency:

- English learner students who entered with basic English proficiency were reclassified, on average, in 4.5 years, and 75 percent were reclassified by 2012/13.
- English learner students who entered with intermediate English proficiency were reclassified, on average, in 3.7 years, and 81 percent were reclassified by 2012/13.
- English learner students who entered with advanced English proficiency were reclassified, on average, in 2.5 years, and 92 percent were reclassified by 2012/13.

**Girls who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district school achieved reclassification faster than boys**

On average, female English learner students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district and who were reclassified during the study period were reclassified in 3.0 years—half a year faster than their male peers (3.5 years). Overall, 87 percent of girls and 83 percent of boys who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district in 2000/01–2007/08 were reclassified by 2012/13. Regardless of initial English proficiency level, girls achieved reclassification faster than boys did; girls with intermediate or advanced English proficiency also achieved reclassification at higher rates than boys did (table 1).

**Speakers of Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Amharic who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district school took less time to achieve reclassification than the group average, while speakers of Somali, Spanish, and Samoan took longer than average**

Students in Road Map district schools spoke a total of 167 languages. However, 81 percent of the English learner students spoke a total of 12 languages. Speakers of Cantonese (2.6 years to reclassification),

**Table 1. Time and rate of reclassification as former English learner students among English learner students who entered kindergarten in Road Map district schools between 2000/01 and 2007/08, by gender and initial English proficiency level**

| Gender | Basic English proficiency                   |                                    | Intermediate English proficiency            |                                    | Advanced English proficiency                |                                    |
|--------|---|------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
|        | Mean years to reclassification <sup>a</sup> | Rate of reclassification (percent) | Mean years to reclassification <sup>a</sup> | Rate of reclassification (percent) | Mean years to reclassification <sup>a</sup> | Rate of reclassification (percent) |
| Girls  | 4.1   | 74                                 | 3.5   | 83                                 | 2.3   | 93                                 |
| Boys   | 4.8   | 76                                 | 3.8   | 79                                 | 2.6   | 91                                 |
| Total  | 4.5   | 75                                 | 3.7   | 81                                 | 2.5   | 92                                 |

a. Includes only students who were reclassified by 2012/13.

**Source:** Author's analysis based on data from the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction for 2000/01–2012/13.

Vietnamese (2.8 years), and Amharic (2.9 years) took, on average, less time to achieve reclassification than their peers, and speakers of Somali (3.8 years), Spanish (3.8 years), and Samoan (4.2 years) took longer (table 2).<sup>3</sup>

Time to achieve reclassification did not appear to be related to the rate of reclassification. For example, Ukrainian speakers achieved reclassification less quickly than average—3.4 years compared with the mean of 3.2 years—but a larger percentage of Ukrainian speakers (96 percent) achieved reclassification compared with all English learner students (85 percent). Conversely, Tagalog speakers took less time than average to achieve reclassification (3.0 years), but a smaller percentage (80 percent) achieved reclassification.

**Table 2. Time and rate of reclassification as former English learner students among English learner students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district school between 2000/01 and 2007/08, by home language**

| Home language | English learner students |         | Mean years to reclassification <sup>a</sup> | Rate of reclassification (percent) |
|---------------|--------------------------|---------|---|------------------------------------|
|               | Number                   | Percent |   |                                    |
| Cantonese     | 260                      | 4       | 2.6   | 89                                 |
| Vietnamese    | 940                      | 14      | 2.8   | 87                                 |
| Amharic       | 61                       | 1       | 2.9   | 85                                 |
| Tagalog       | 169                      | 2       | 3.0   | 80                                 |
| Punjabi       | 161                      | 2       | 3.0   | 95                                 |
| Cambodian     | 127                      | 2       | 3.0   | 87                                 |
| Other         | 1,333                    | 19      | 3.0   | 87                                 |
| Russian       | 170                      | 2       | 3.3   | 94                                 |
| Ukrainian     | 271                      | 4       | 3.4   | 96                                 |
| Arabic        | 49                       | 1       | 3.6   | 89                                 |
| Somali        | 487                      | 7       | 3.8   | 77                                 |
| Spanish       | 2,869                    | 41      | 3.8   | 82                                 |
| Samoan        | 47                       | 1       | 4.2   | 86                                 |
| All languages | 6,944                    | 100     | 3.2   | 85                                 |

a. Includes only students who were reclassified by 2012/13.

**Source:** Author's analysis based on data from the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction for 2000/01–2012/13.

**English learner students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district and had been born in China, Ethiopia, Vietnam, and the Philippines were reclassified more quickly than their peers who had been born in the United States**

Seventy-two percent of English learner students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district in 2000/01–2007/08 had been born in the United States. These students, on average, were reclassified in 3.2 years, and 83 percent of them were reclassified by 2012/13 (table 3). Foreign-born English learner students were reclassified more slowly (3.5 years, on average) but at higher rates (89 percent by 2012/13). English learner students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district in 2000/01–2007/08 and had been born abroad came from 140 countries. Of these students 46 percent had been born in one of nine countries. Those who had been born in four countries—China, Ethiopia, Vietnam, and the Philippines—were reclassified more quickly than those who had been born in the other five countries as well as English learner students born in the United States.

**Hispanic and Pacific Islander students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district took longer to achieve reclassification, and Black students had lower rates of reclassification than other English learner students did**

On average, Asian English learner students (primarily Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Tagalog speakers) who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district and who were reclassified during the study period achieved reclassification in the fastest time (2.8 years), while Pacific Islander students (primarily Samoan speakers) took the longest time to achieve reclassification (4.2 years). White English learner students (primarily Russian and Ukrainian speakers) had the highest rate of reclassification (93 percent), while Black English learner students (primarily Amharic and Somali speakers) had the lowest (79 percent). Specifically, the analysis found that:

- Asian students were reclassified in 2.8 years, and 88 percent were reclassified by 2012/13.
- White students were reclassified in 3.1 years, and 93 percent were reclassified by 2012/13.
- Black students were reclassified in 3.3 years, and 79 percent were reclassified by 2012/13.
- Hispanic students were reclassified in 3.6 years, and 82 percent were reclassified by 2012/13.
- Pacific Islander students were reclassified in 4.2 years, and 82 percent were reclassified by 2012/13.

**Table 3. Time and rate of reclassification as former English learner students among English learner students who entered kindergarten in Road Map district schools between 2000/01 and 2007/08, by country of birth**

| Country of birth | English learner students |         | Mean years to reclassification <sup>a</sup> | Rate of reclassification (percent) |
|------------------|--------------------------|---------|---|------------------------------------|
|                  | Number                   | Percent |   |                                    |
| United States    | 5,001                    | 72      | 3.2   | 83                                 |
| Foreign born     | 1,943                    | 28      | 3.5   | 89                                 |
| Kenya            | 45                       | 1       | 4.6   | 84                                 |
| Russia           | 55                       | 1       | 4.0   | 98                                 |
| Somalia          | 61                       | 1       | 4.0   | 58                                 |
| Mexico           | 403                      | 6       | 3.7   | 82                                 |
| Ukraine          | 118                      | 2       | 3.4   | 95                                 |
| Philippines      | 56                       | 1       | 3.0   | 80                                 |
| Vietnam          | 90                       | 1       | 2.8   | 90                                 |
| Ethiopia         | 26                       | <1      | 2.8   | 85                                 |
| China            | 33                       | <1      | 2.6   | 94                                 |
| Other countries  | 1,056                    | 15      | 3.5   | 94                                 |
| All countries    | 6,944                    | 100     | 3.2   | 85                                 |

a. Includes only students who were reclassified by 2012/13.

**Source:** Author's analysis based on data from the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction for 2000/01–2012/13.

**English learner students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district and were eligible for special education services took longer to achieve reclassification and had lower rates of reclassification than their peers who were not eligible for special education**

English learner students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district school and who were eligible for special education services accounted for 4 percent of the study population. They took an average of 4.4 years to achieve reclassification, compared with 3.2 years for English learner students who were not eligible for special education. English learner students who were eligible for special education also had a lower rate of reclassification (67 percent) than English learner students who were not eligible for special education services (85 percent).

### **Implications of the study findings**

The results of this study provide descriptive data that can help the Road Map districts set realistic expectations for the amount of time it takes English learner students to achieve English proficiency. These results may also help state education agencies as they create new accountability targets to comply with the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015.

The findings of this study suggest that it is reasonable to expect longer times to reclassification for English learner students entering kindergarten with basic or intermediate English proficiency than for those with advanced proficiency. The findings also suggest that some students—such as Spanish speakers and Somali speakers—may need additional support to accelerate their language acquisition. Additional research is necessary to understand why Spanish speakers and Somali speakers are taking longer to achieve reclassification compared with other English learner students. In addition, schools and districts could monitor the supports received by English learner students from groups that typically take longer to achieve reclassification and intervene when these students are not making progress.

### **Limitations of the study**

The time to reclassification reported in this study may underestimate the time it takes English learner students to be reclassified. This is because the analysis does not include English learner students who did not achieve reclassification within the time period of the study. Consequently, the reported times to reclassification should be viewed as applicable only to students who were reclassified during the study period. The average of 3.2 years to achieve reclassification can be seen as typical for the 85 percent of English learner students who entered Road Map district schools in kindergarten and achieved reclassification by 2012/13. The time it took the entire population to achieve reclassification is longer.

Variations in time to reclassification and rate of reclassification may also be the result of factors not examined in this study, including student characteristics. For example, differences across home language groups may reflect differences in students' socioeconomic status, home language literacy and education background, or parent education. Additional research is necessary to understand how these characteristics relate to reclassification outcomes.

## Notes

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1. Greenberg Motamedi (2015) also examines school factors—such as schoolwide percentage of English learner students and students eligible for the federal school lunch program—that may be related to reclassification outcomes. Those analyses are not discussed in this brief.
2. Greenberg Motamedi (2015) also found that the time to reclassification and the rate of reclassification differed by cohort. See appendix A of that study.
3. Outcomes by home language for students who entered kindergarten in a Road Map district school differ from those for the full population of students who began school in grades K–5. Greenberg Motamedi (2015) found that in the full population of students speakers of Arabic (3.2 years to reclassification), Amharic (3.1 years), and Korean (2.3 years) took less time to achieve reclassification than the group average, while speakers of Samoan (4.0 years) and Spanish (4.2 years) took longer to achieve reclassification.

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